DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 701 CE 040 681

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TITLE State Legislative Perceptions of Vocational Education. Occasional Paper No. 102.
INSTITUTION Ohio State Univ., Columbus. National Center for Research in Vocational Education.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 21p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Center Publications, National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1960 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (OC102--$2.75).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Economic Development; *Educational Change; *Educational Principles; *Educational Quality; Educational Research; Futures (of Society); Legislators; Postsecondary Education; *Role of Education; *School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; Standards; State Government; Technological Advancement

ABSTRACT

Key people in the legislatures of 13 states notably active in educational reform or restructuring (Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Nebraska, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) were contacted to obtain information on how state legislatures look at vocational education in light of the overall educational excellence and reform movement. The general view was that a good basic education is the best thing one could provide for high school students. A growing feeling was that vocational education is more appropriate at the postsecondary level. In most cases, legislatures had not addressed differential standards for vocational education. The general consensus was that there was little or no planning for vocational education. Except for the south, respondents in other areas had a good reaction to the perceived quality of vocational education. Respondents expected vocational education to turn out a skilled work force, but the general feeling was that funding levels needed to be improved to accomplish that. The Federal program had influence on State policy. The legislatures did not see the private sector as having been a major influence on programs. If it existed at all, economic development policy related only to postsecondary vocational education. The growing emphasis on future-oriented, technical training was at the postsecondary level. (Questions and answers are appended.) (YLB)

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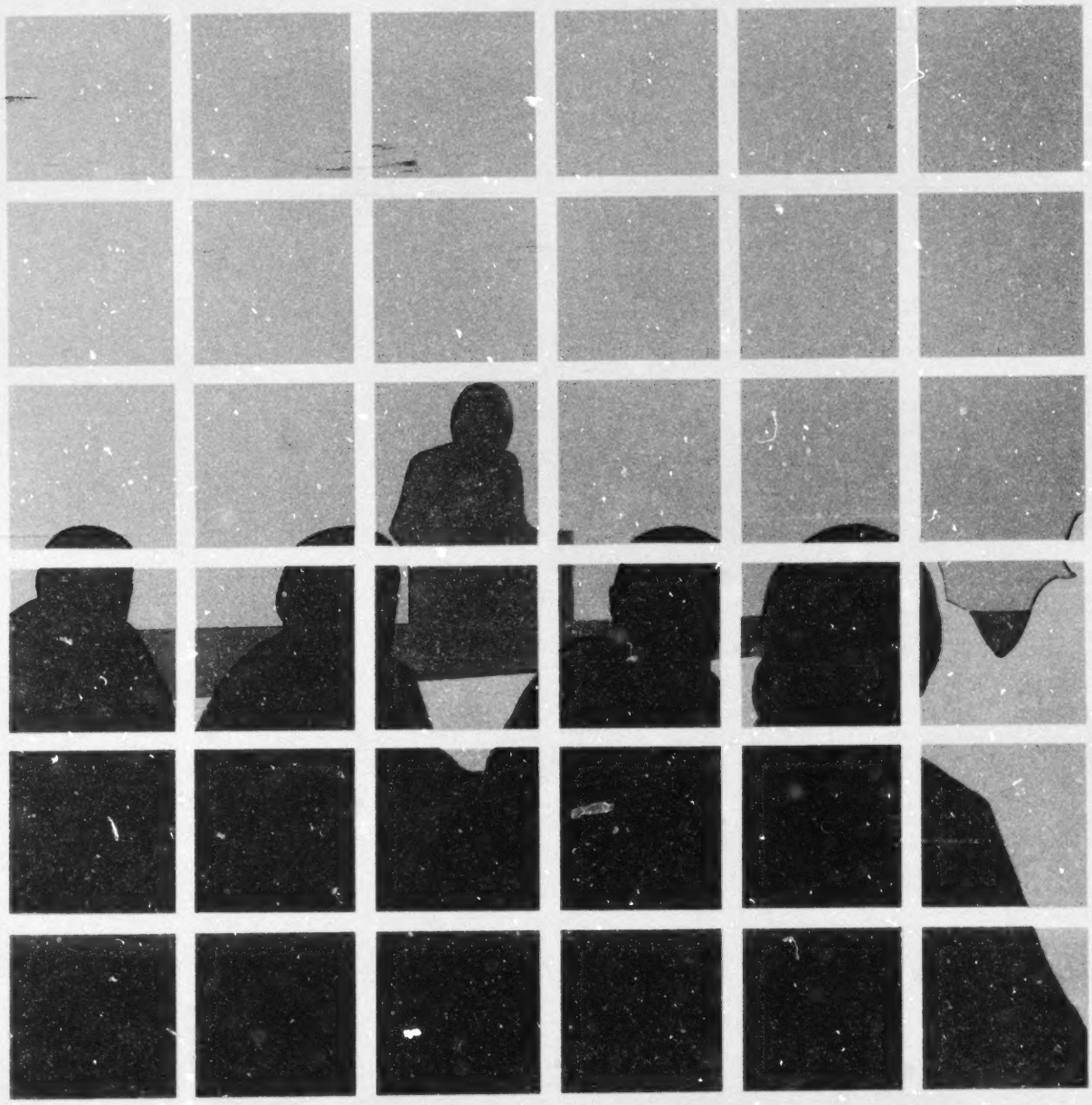

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Occasional Paper No. 102

STATE LEGISLATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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1984

FOREWORD

A great deal of attention has been focused recently on the need for excellence in education. The stimulus for the many reports issued over the past year or so is a widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of our schools. While all of these studies agree that the Nation's schools should insist on higher achievement in basic skill areas, there is considerable disagreement about which areas are most important.

Vocational education is conspicuously absent in most of these reports. However, the major changes and policy redirections resulting from these studies will affect vocational education for many years to come. It is incumbent upon vocational educators to work with policymakers in order to ensure that the impact will be positive.

Ronald Field is certainly qualified to help us understand how State legislatures look at vocational education. He has over 20 years of experience in government, politics, and education, at local, State, and National levels. Mr. Field's degree work at the University of Oregon shows similar diversity. His bachelor of science degree is in political science, he holds a master of science in juvenile corrections, and he has almost completed a doctorate in human development.

Some highlights of his career include working for the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, for Upward Bound and VISTA, and for the Oregon House of Representatives. He has been Assistant to the Chancellor of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, Coordinator of State and Organizational Relations for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and since 1980 has served as State Director for Education and Labor of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education and The Ohio State University are happy to present Ronald Field's paper on "State Legislative Perceptions of Vocational Education."

Robert E. Taylor
Executive Director
The National Center for Research
in Vocational Education

STATE LEGISLATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Introduction

I have attempted in this effort to acquire a sense of how State legislatures look at vocational education today in light of the overall educational excellence and reform movement that seems to be sweeping the country. In order to do that, I reviewed various publications to get a better idea as to which States—and perhaps more specifically, which State legislatures—might be active in the area of vocational education. With that information at hand, I proceeded to contact key people in those legislatures, some of whom were members, some staff. From those contacts and the questions I had prepared for them to answer, I acquired the information obtained in this paper.

In order to protect individuals, I will not divulge the names of the people with whom I spoke in the States. Also, in order to protect my employer, the National Conference of State Legislatures, I should say that the information contained herein has been interpreted by me for the purpose of this informational effort, and any opinions derived from the information gathered are strictly my own and do not necessarily represent the policies of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Framework

Individuals in 13 States were contacted. This sampling represents 26 percent of the States and covers fairly well all the geographic regions around the country. While I would like to have had more representation from the West, contact persons were not available before time ran out.

In any case, the States represented in this survey included the following:

Colorado
Connecticut
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Kansas
Maine
Nebraska
Ohio
South Carolina
Tennessee
Virginia
Washington

As I said previously, I attempted to contact States that were notably active in educational reform or restructuring. As it turned out, it was difficult to avoid the temptation of using southern States, as they seem to be among the most active today. Two very large States I had hoped to use, California and Texas, were not really ready to be surveyed. Both of them are in the process of studying their vocational education systems for future action or making major decisions about their educational systems currently. In the case of California, a major study is underway that will look at the role of vocational education in secondary schools. It is expected to be completed this

fall and to be acted upon by the legislature in 1985. Texas is about to start a special session of the legislature that will determine the direction of all elementary and secondary education in the State for some time. Therefore, answers to my survey questions in these two States could soon be rendered obsolete.

I devised a set of 10 questions, which I presented by telephone to each of my State contacts. The questions were as follows:

1. How does the legislature currently view vocational education in light of the National and State educational excellence movement?

2. In its activities to improve education in your State, has the legislature addressed the standards for vocational education along with other aspects of education?

3. In terms of educational planning for the State, where does the legislature see vocational education in the scheme of things?

4. How do legislators see vocational education quality relative to other courses of education? Is it perceived as doing well in teaching job skills, increasing awareness of career opportunities, and teaching good work habits?

5. What does the legislature want vocational education to accomplish now and in the foreseeable future? Is funding adequate to accomplish what it wants from and deems as important for vocational education?

6. Are state vocational education programs and funding influenced by federal programs? How?

7. Is the private sector involved in planning for vocational education? Is it being coordinated with the Job Training Partnership Act?

8. To what extent is vocational education policy tied to economic development policy?

9. Does the legislature see secondary vocational education as being valuable? Postsecondary?

10. What major trends are foreseen for vocational education in your State?

Respondents were allowed to give as succinct or as expansive an answer as they thought was necessary. Because the legislatures sometimes delegate much of the policy authority for education to a State board of education, it was not always possible to get a clear response to all questions, simply because it was not a recent topic of consideration.

Findings

The results of this rather unscientific survey were as different as they were the same. Just as a certain pattern began to emerge among similar types of States, one would come along with a completely different view on the subject. Therefore, I will take each question in the order in which it was asked and summarize the various responses I received for it.

The Legislative View

It appears that within each chamber there is a cadre of staunch supporters who look out for the interests of vocational education. However, there is a growing feeling that real vocational education in this day and age belongs more at the postsecondary level than at the high school level. "The pendulum has swung," said one respondent, "to the point where the greatest concern for high school students is in making sure they get a good general education."

That does not rule out a place for some type of vocational education at the secondary level. In some States, it means that vocational education will play a different role as part of a high school curriculum, not real job skill provider, but an opportunity to acquire an understanding of various occupational choices and to prepare students with some basic skills that will put them in a good position to seek more specific occupational training once out of high school. In other States, it is seen as still being integral to the core curriculum, especially in more rural States. In still others, vocational education is seen as not important at all at the high school level, but of more value at the postsecondary level. In no case did anyone say the legislature was planning to discontinue vocational education in the high schools, but virtually everyone saw it expanding in quantity and quality beyond high school. One State respondent referred to postsecondary vocational education as a real growth area for education.

Among the western States, one saw the reform movement applying equally to vocational education, the other said it was a separate issue—not included in the reform movement.

In the midwestern States, the view was mixed. Two States said that vocational education was integral to the whole educational process, while two others said little attention was paid to it.

In the two northeastern States, one said vocational education was dealt with equally, and the other said that reforms had no direct impact on it, even though more resources were put into it.

The southern States were split three and one. One State said vocational education was still seen as "essential to the whole process," while the others viewed it as something that had to be looked at carefully in the determination of what a high school education should be. One said the State was going to look at the effectiveness of postsecondary vocational education as part of its reform process, as well.

The general view in light of the excellence movement was that a good basic education is the best thing one could provide for a high school student, including some alternatives for those students who might need them.

The Standards

In most cases, legislatures did not or are not addressing differential standards for vocational education. Where standards have been dealt with by the legislature for secondary students, they apply across the board. In some States, the legislature does not have the authority to set educational standards.

Two States said that, in light of newly adopted standards for high school education, they were concerned that some smaller school districts would not be easily able to afford to apply the new standards equally to vocational education students. Both of these were in States where the legislatures did not appropriate large support levels for local schools, and districts were expected to raise most of their own money for such things as vocational education.

In the West, one State said it did not have legislative authority to impose standards; another set the same standards for both academic and vocational education.

Three of the four midwestern States had not dealt with standards for vocational education, while one had sent a directive to the State board of education to study secondary school standards, including vocational education, and report back.

In the northeastern States, one legislature postponed action on a requested report for a State plan to upgrade vocational education until 1985. The other set the same standards for all secondary education.

In the South, two States set the same standards for all secondary education; two are considering new standards for vocational education, along with other aspects of secondary education, but this has not been finalized; and one has asked for a role and scope study of vocational education in the secondary schools in light of new higher graduation standards, which have limited the number of vocational courses students can take.

The Scheme of Things

At this point, the discussion begins to turn more toward consideration of postsecondary training. The general consensus is that there is little or no planning for vocational education, but that it is a good attraction for new business and industry, especially if well developed at the postsecondary level.

Among the western States, one simply said that vocational education was seen as important in terms of work force preparation; the other said it was treated somewhat apart, that the regular educational system does not represent the interests of vocational education, and also, that there was poor planning and goal setting in vocational education.

Of the midwestern States, one said it considered vocational education important in the scheme of things, but that the legislature did not deal with planning and left those decisions to the State board. The other three said they considered postsecondary vocational education more important, two especially mentioning the attraction for business and industry. One also mentioned the importance placed on retraining unemployed workers; another discussed how they had developed a cooperative effort with industry on quick start-up training.

In the northeast, one State said the legislature had not considered vocational education in its planning, and the other said that only 2 of 20 bills concerned vocational education: one to increase opportunities for adults to update their literacy skills and another to study vocational education for a changing job market, which will be dealt with further in the 1985 session.

Four out of five southern States said that vocational education was not specifically part of their educational planning. One said the major concern was for a good basic education at the secondary level. Another said that there was no vested interest in vocational education in the legislature. The one that responded more positively said it was considered highly because of its potential attraction to business and industry. They questioned, however, whether there would be time in a regular school day for high school students to meet new State requirements and take vocational education courses too.

Quality

Answers to this question were very interesting in light of previous comments. Only in the South was there much in the way of disparaging remarks. In virtually all other places, there was a generally good reaction to the perceived quality of vocational education. Again, however, there was a more positive attitude toward postsecondary-level programs.

Of the two western States, one said the impression was that vocational education does well, although it is on a collision course with the newly imposed admission requirements set by the higher education system in the State, which may have the effect of crowding out time for vocational education classes for high school students as those standards become the norm for high school graduation. The other State said that the quality of postsecondary vocational education was perceived as being satisfactory, but that the quality at the secondary level is in question since the legislature is no longer sure that real job preparation at that level is possible.

In the Midwest, the view runs the course from "the quality is at least as good as in academic programs" in one State to "no comment" in another. A third said vocational education was generally well regarded in terms of quality, while the fourth said that was not a concern at the secondary level, as it was more important to ensure an adequate program for basic skills than actual job preparation. They did not say how they perceived the quality of their postsecondary program.

Both northeastern States had good impressions of the quality of vocational education. One said that it had high standards for their vocational students, which helped improve the overall program.

In three of the five southern States, the respondents indicated a definite lack of trust for the quality of vocational programs, especially at the high school level. One said its legislature had serious questions as to the importance of secondary vocational education in comparison to basic academic course work, as employers are saying that they want literate trainees from the high schools. Another State chimed in with the view that vocational education quality was distrusted: they had not seen great results from past funding. The third said vocational education was directed at a particular "class" of students, and vocational teachers are not required to have the same certification as regular academic teachers. A fourth said the quality of vocational education was a real mixed bag, while the fifth said the quality was required by law to be the same as any other educational program. Clearly, the South seems to be taking a much more critical look at its programs.

What Is Expected

This was a somewhat difficult question for the respondents to answer other than to say they expected vocational education to turn out a skilled work force. Perhaps that is all they could say under the circumstances. However, there was a general feeling that funding levels needed to be improved to accomplish that task, especially for the equipment necessary to train workers in more technical enterprises. Again, there was the recurring theme that high schools should concentrate on providing good basic education while leaving the real job training to the postsecondary schools.

The western States agreed generally with what vocational education should accomplish, as well as with the view that they are going to need better financing to accomplish what they should. One said the secondary programs were well financed, but the postsecondary programs were not.

The other said neither level was well financed, and they needed more good skill labs and interdistrict skill centers, which were popular but the legislature was slow to fund.

The consensus in the Midwest also was that vocational education should be used to improve the work force, but only in one State was it thought to be well financed. That State said the legislature expected it to be a good alternative to the academic program, and it needed to do more to retrain adults, expecially those changing from agricultural to nonagricultural jobs.

The two northeastern States agreed that vocational education was expected to provide a trained labor force for the purpose of attracting business and industry, and one was especially interested in broadening its economic base. One, however, said that its vocational-technical schools were well supported, while the other said its postsecondary facilities were not well funded for what needed to be accomplished.

The southern States agreed that postsecondary vocational education should be providing opportunities for new skills in an increasingly technical world. Thoughts were quite mixed, however, as to the expectations for high school programs. One said secondary vocational programs needed to be upgraded so as to be more than "holding places" for students who cannot make it in academic programs. Another indicated an expectation that high school programs should provide more career awareness. There was a general feeling that traditional vocational education was fairly well funded, but that programs seeking to prepare individuals for new technologies needed better support. One said directly that traditional secondary program funding may have to give way to support more technical, job-specific training at the postsecondary level.

Federal Influence

Except in a few States, respondents were less clear about how to answer this question than any other. It would appear that the Federal program does have some influence on State policy, but that it is dependent on the extent to which the State funds vocational education as opposed to local funding.

Both western States said that Federal program requirements had a direct influence on State programs and policies. One said, in fact, that State policy follows the Federal mandates for the expenditure of Federal vocational education funds.

The midwestern States were much less definite. Except for one, they indicated that Federal requirements were not an overriding factor in setting State vocational education policy. In that one, the Federal influence was greater because Federal funds were the primary funding source for State vocational education programs. Locally run programs were mostly supported by local resources and, therefore, except for the portion that was Federal, were not especially driven by Federal requirements.

The northeastern States were split. One said that Federal influence was not strong, while the other said State planning was geared to Federal requirements.

Of the five southern States, three said there was Federal influence in State program planning and operation, and two were not sure. Of the three, one even said that Federal funds were the primary support for its secondary vocational education program.

Private Sector Involvement

Responses to this question came somewhat as a surprise. For the most part, the legislatures see private sector involvement as having been tangential up to now. Except in a couple of States, it was not seen as having been a major influence on programs, particularly at the secondary level. In most cases to date, the private sector is seen as being more willing to serve in advisory capacities than to provide resources or facilities for training.

In the West, one State said there was a definite involvement required by State law. That requirement is to have significant private sector representation on both secondary and postsecondary advisory committees, which has been of considerable benefit. In the other State, that involvement has been much less significant, despite the fact that it is desirable in order to help provide better planning and goal setting for vocational education.

The midwestern response was quite tepid. In none of the four States contacted was there a perception that the private sector was involved to the extent that it should be. If it was, it was at the postsecondary level primarily.

The two northeastern States seemed more enthusiastic about the private sector's involvement, in that it was perceived to be growing through the better use of advisory committees and the Private Industry Councils related to JTPA. This was the only place about which a coordinated effort with JTPA was known.

The South was the one region where private sector involvement seemed to be prominent. In four of the five States there was and had been such an involvement and it was growing. In one, there was an effort underway with private interests to look at JTPA linkages with vocational education. Because of the decline of the textile industry, these States were working with employers to find ways to broaden their economic bases so as not to be overly dependent on a single industry.

Links to Economic Development Policy

If it exists at all, economic development policy relates only to postsecondary vocational education. All the States contacted said that it was an area that needed to be worked on, but that for now there was not much to report. It was a unanimous perception that whatever connection there was was ad hoc, at best, when it was needed to mount a quick training program to serve a particular new employer; otherwise, it was not an ongoing collaboration.

The Relative Value of Secondary and Postsecondary Vocational Education

As a question of perception, hardly any question could more open a Pandora's box of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the responses were consistent with previous perceptions, which were that, as a means of getting trained for a job with a future, high school vocational education was not going to make it any more. The growing emphasis for future-oriented, technical training was at the postsecondary level. While, secondary vocational courses were seen by some as valuable to serve students who required an alternative to an academic program, they would be more valuable if they provided the general background necessary, along with good basic skills, to be able to pursue a private or public training program after high school. Postsecondary programs would be more valuable than they are already perceived if they had better funding and better facilities so they could respond more quickly to training needs

Again, this is a question that resulted in a generally unanimous response, which obviates the need to go over the perceptions region by region. Suffice it to say that there is a growing question about the continued value of high school vocational education as a definite program, rather than incorporating some of its awareness functions into a general education program.

Major Trends

By this point, the responses to this question were fairly predictable. The move is toward technology and technological training. Nevertheless, there were regional differences. Some see growth as pushing job development and the training it requires; others see unemployment as the driving force behind more retraining capability. There is no question that, as one western State person put it, occupational education is itself a growth industry.

In the West, training and retraining programs were seen as increasingly important. One person also said that there needed to be greater integration between vocational and academic education so as to provide for better basic skills that students could generalize to many jobs and training programs.

In the Midwest, legislative perceptions were that vocational training programs would have to become more sophisticated and technical and better coordinated with the private sector and with other training programs so as to avoid duplication. One State here did say that they needed to provide higher funding levels to secondary vocational education so as to be better balanced in their program offerings.

States in the Northeast saw more computer education, as well as more emphasis on retraining displaced workers, in cooperation with JTPA and adult basic education programs. One also said that it will need to move toward more coordination between the vocational system and the university and college system so as to maximize delivery of high quality training.

In the South, there was a unanimously assertive perception that they would have to continue to improve technical training, purchase of service for training capability, and coordination with economic development programs. Postsecondary training would have to be even more responsive to the needs of business and industry, as the competition between States is growing. Secondary vocational education is seen as becoming more a career exploration program than a training program.

Conclusions

It seems clear that State legislatures need to have a better understanding of their vocational education programs at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. While there is some understanding now, it is not in good perspective as to how one function fits with another and where they want to go with it. One thing is clear, however. The old ways are phasing out and new occupations and ways of training for them must be pursued.

Perhaps a State legislature is not the best place to get an operational picture of vocational education, since it generally sets broad goals and funding expectations while delegating the operational policy making and program authority to State and local boards. Their familiarity with these programs are at their peak during periods of oversight and at appropriations hearings. My sense was that State legislatures were even less familiar with vocational education than with other facets

of the educational enterprise, which may say something about the overall perception of what vocational education has been in our modern world. My further sense is that legislatures are going to become much more familiar with vocational education as it addresses perceived economic and social needs for the future.

One question that came up a number of times was, "What do we do with the majority of high school students who do not go on to a 4-year college?" Especially now that graduation standards are being upgraded to give everyone a more "well-rounded" education, new forms of secondary prevocational education will have to be developed to provide the alternatives for the non-college-bound students who will have to pursue some postsecondary training in order to get a job with a future and the skills to be able to change jobs. In the world of our future, the latter may become even more important.

Questions and Answers

Ronald H. Field

Question: I think that the comments you have made seem to be right on target. I just wanted to point out that there is a critical need to link vocational education with economic development. I think if you are trying to attract a particular employer, then you must bring together people who can convince that employer to locate in your city. But there usually are not any structured or systematic programs that do this, despite the critical need for State government to bring vocational education and economic development closer together. A concern I have is that a number of people who are talking about vocational education have a mind-set that vocational education is for a given class of people—for poor students, for economically disadvantaged students—and they would never consider vocational education for their own children. I believe this is something we really have to be concerned about and guard against in order to ensure that we don't start programming vocational education only for certain populations. We must also look at balancing vocational education with career education, and most importantly, with good academic preparation. As Mr. Field said, if a student can think, can reason, can analyze, can make decisions, that's what is most important. Then, the employers and the various training institutions can teach such an individual the specific occupational skills needed. But, if we just focus on specific skills training and vocational education, with today's rapid changes in technology and so forth, we are simply doing what we have done in the past—teaching obsolete skills.

Let me say that I certainly didn't approach this topic with any kind of vocational education bias. I should tell you that at one time in my life, I was a student of vocational agriculture in Santa Barbara High School in California. I stayed in it for a couple of years, raised my steer and my chickens, and really had an intention of going on to become an agricultural engineer, until I found out that I was not very well prepared in mathematics. Nobody had told me in terms of preparing myself—that if engineering really was my interest, I would need more than just taking vocational agriculture and belonging to the Future Farmers of America. I needed to take more science and some more math classes. I think therein lies some sort of lesson.

Question: How do you think State legislators perceive the relationship between, or the differences between, the Job Training Partnership Act and the new vocational legislation?

One of the biggest probiems in the survey is that most people didn't know what to say on that subject. The JTPA, for the first time in our employment and training history, has some provisions in it to involve the State legislatures. The key thing to remember is that JTPA is a very new process. While some aspects of it may be an outgrowth of past Federal job training programs, it is substantially different, and many States are still trying to get it off the ground and to work out the administrative and legislative wrinkles. So, in those States where the legislatures are holding hearings to find out how JTPA is working, they are asking some very good questions. I'm sure at the next regular legislative sessions in 1985 you are going to see a lot more interest in JTPA and its coordination with education programs springing forth.

Question: One clear message in your presentation is that we have to improve communication. What are some effective communication mechanisms and who should they involve?

I have made a number of presentations on this over the years, often for student groups. I am presently on a National board for State student associations as an advisor, and one of the things they always ask is, "How do we better inform the legislature of our needs as students so that we can get better student financial aid and so on?" One thing I always say is that you must remember that politics is always spelled with four "p's"—Preparation, Presence, Patience, and Persistence. You will never get anywhere if you leave out one of those. This means, of course, starting from the bottom and developing a set of facts.

We talked earlier about having a two- or three-page fact sheet that boils down valuable information about vocational education into a very succinct form. Some study commission down the road might use a lengthy paper, but a legislator, if he or she is going to use the information, is going to want the most succinct tool possible. So the first p—Preparation—is to prepare this information in as succinct a form as possible. Presence—the second p—is letting legislators know that you are not just interested in them when it is appropriations time, but that this is an ongoing and perhaps "ongrowing" enterprise that is important to them, to their districts, to their citizens, to students young and old, and to their State. Localize it as much as possible and persist with it. Put them on your mailing list. Tell them you would like to keep them informed and up-to-date, and also you would like to meet with them on occasion. Maybe you will want to set up some sort of a formal structure to invite them to participate in some decision making at your level. Then have the Patience—the third p—to be told "no, maybe not this time, maybe another time."

Also, utilize your friends. There is always a cadre of support for your enterprise in legislative bodies. Work on them to be better informed spokespersons for you. Nothing is going to influence another legislator better than a colleague. I think it also means listening—listening to what they are thinking and what they are perceiving and what they are projecting into the future for policy that they are going to be making and for money that they are going to be appropriating. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on them and increasingly so. Federalism didn't start with the Reagan administration, and the increasing pressures on States to do more isn't going to end with it. States are going to have a larger role to play in all decisions and I think a lot of people, including the American Vocational Association and the National Center, recognize this trend. You need to find a way to better inform State legislatures. But Persistence—the fourth p—sums it up. Persistence on a regular but not overbearing basis, with succinct information that offers the prospect of policy options for the future, is how you are going to get through to State legislatures.

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